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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BUCHAREST 001584

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EUR/NCE AARON JENSON

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SUBJECT: ETHNIC HUNGARIAN PARTY STRUGGLES FOR GREATER
MAGYAR AUTONOMY, POLITICAL MARKET SHARE

Classified By: DCM Mark Taplin for reasons 1.5 (B) and (D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Under pressure from more radical Hungarian ethnic parties and the need to retain sufficient support to remain in parliament, the Democratic Union (or Alliance) of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR), has been more vocal of late in its calls for greater territorial autonomy for ethnic Magyars. UDMR leaders told us they are seeking territorial autonomy for ethnic Hungarian (Szeckler and Magyar) areas in Romania. UDMR President Marko Bela declared at the recent party congress that his party wanted to give the Hungarian language official status in Hungarian-majority regions. While the party has demanded cultural autonomy in the past, this is the first time the UDMR has publicly pushed for territorial autonomy. Party discipline is problematic, since the UDMR is less a formal party structure than an alliance sharing a common ethnicity and a shared interest in benefiting from participation in the ruling coalition. While UDMR has cobbled together a decade of incumbency as part of one or another governing political alignment, its members have ideological views that run the gamut from conservative to radical. End Summary.

Why Autonomy Now?

12. (C) In recent weeks, the UDMR has become increasingly vocal in advocating for greater administrative and territorial autonomy in areas where ethnic Hungarians (both Szecklers and Magyars) are in the majority. Although cultural autonomy and language rights have been a feature of the UDMR platform since the early 1990s, the push for it is only recently that they have been bringing up the issue of greater territorial autonomy and control over local budgets and resources. In meetings this fall with Poloff, Senator Csaba Sogor, Senator Peter Eckstein Kovacs, and Viktor Sata, Personal Advisor to UDMR President Marko Bela, all observed that UDMR calls for autonomy were increasing because of electoral politics in their home base, as more radical elements in the Magyar community, including the Hungarian Civic Union and the National Council of Transylvanians, have racked up their rhetoric calling for greater autonomy. This pressure from other political formations and from more radical elements within the party have also forced UDMR President Bela to adopt a more aggressive position.

13. (C) One concern within the UDMR is to arrest a slide in vote share, which is a critical preoccupation for Bela and others (note: the party received 6.2 percent in the 2004 election, down from 7.5 percent in 1992. The UDMR's current polling suggests support for the party is currently hovering even closer to the 5 percent electoral threshold necessary to ensure parliamentary representation). Our interlocutors noted that this slide has been due to two main factors: the defection of potential voters to other political groups, both

Hungarian-minority and Romanian, and the declining number of ethnic Hungarians in Romania. Many ethnic Hungarians have left or are leaving the country to work in the EU, UK, Canada, Australia, Israel and the United States.

14. (C) UDMR President Bela has acknowledged that new legislation is necessary to make autonomy possible, including a proposed National Minorities bill. The bill would essentially enshrine the UDMR as the only officially sanctioned ethnic Hungarian party, and also proposes making Hungarian an official language in predominantly ethnic Hungarian areas. The bill would also create a university curriculum taught in the Hungarian language, a long-sought UDMR goal. But building support for a law on minorities has proved an uphill struggle. Efforts by the UDMR's Bela and his allies last spring to bring forward a bill on national minorities quickly ran into trouble, both because Bela was caught in the angry political crossfire between the presidential and prime ministerial camps and because, according to former Basescu political strategist Claudiu Saftoiu, the Romanian president believes the UDMR is thoroughly corrupt and deserves to lose the support of the Hungarian minority. Subsequently, the UDMR has been unable to even get a quorum to allow discussion of the bill since all other major Romanian party leaders have spoken out against granting greater territorial autonomy for ethnic Hungarians.

What Does the UDMR Have Against The Proposed Anti-Corruption Agency?

15. (C) Our UDMR interlocutors in fact give some credence to the view from Cotroceni Palace in trying to justify the UDMR's adamant opposition to the proposed National Integrity Agency (ANI). While Sogor insisted that the party was

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opposing the bill because of "procedural" issues; Kovacs and Sogor acknowledged bluntly that there was some truth to public perceptions that the UDMR had a history of corruption and that some UDMR members were reluctant to support the creation of a strongly-empowered anti-corruption agency. Kovacs noted that "it isn't all the money they have now, it's about the first million dollars they made." Kovacs and Sogor evinced concern that an ANI-type body could pursue allegations of early misdeeds among its longer-standing members, and that some of them could not withstand that type of scrutiny.

Security Chiefs' Vote a Result of Political Deals?

16. (C) While most UDMR legislators voted in favor of President Basescu's choices to head the Romanian domestic and foreign intelligence services, Kovacs said he opposed the two candidates, domestic intelligence chief Meyer and foreign intelligence head Saftoiu. Eckstein hinted that he had information about past "anti-Hungarian" actions taken by the two, but would not elaborate. There is no question, however, that presidential political aides, including Saftoiu, have actively tried to undercut support for the UDMR within the Hungarian minority by reaching out to alternate Hungarian political groups, even some which are more hard-line on the autonomy question. While some might argue that Cotroceni has been playing with fire by courting Hungarian nationalists who might challenge Bela and the UDMR mainstream, Basescu's approach may well have provided additional leverage over the UDMR leadership. Still, our interlocutors all denied press reports that UDMR President Marko Bela had thrown his support behind the two candidates in exchange for an assurance that the Hungarian Civic Union, a competing ethnic Magyar organization, would not be allowed to register as a political party.

Comment

17. (SBU) The UDMR's current push for greater ethnic (and

budgetary) autonomy in predominantly Magyar regions appears doomed to failure, given the pressures of shrinking demographics, growing competition from alternative Magyar organizations, and determined opposition from all of the main political parties in Romania. The UDMR has carved out a niche for itself as a perennial coalition partner to larger parties, but it is an open question whether the UDMR can maintain its control over the ethnic Hungarian political agenda in Romania and continue to get past the 5 percent threshold for parliamentary representation. The dilemma for the party is that the ethnic Hungarian minority will lose political power if it cannot rally behind a single banner, but the politics of the Hungarian minority in Romania is looking increasingly fragmented and the UDMR increasingly looks less like a coherent party than a "big tent" alliance whose members' views on self-rule and minority rights run the gamut from radical to restrained. End comment.
Taubman